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ABSTRACT

A professor of outdoor and experiential education reflects on the development of group relations and on lessons in outdoor ethics learned during a canoe trip in the Canadian Arctic. Written to celebrate a transforming experience, this paper illustrates the experiential learning and individual development that can result from intensive outdoor experiences. In addition to the customary events of wilderness travel by canoe, the eight-member party had rich encounters with wildlife and with the land. Noteworthy features of group life included: (1) an absence of overt leadership, yet decisions were made (eventually) that had full group support; (2) a tendency toward spontaneous synchronization of individual activities; and (3) the presence of a spirit of generous helpfulness and cooperation. Several events impelled the author to think and feel differently about the ethics of wilderness travel, his own relationship and responsibility to the land, the questionable ideals of our culture, and whether or not "sport" fishing and hunting are ethically defensible. Plans are outlined for a future trip in which participants enter into a more genuine relationship with the land and discover more deeply the spirit of respect for the wilderness. Intertwined with the narrative are excerpts from Douglas Le Pan's poem "Canoe Trip." (SV)

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MAY THE SPIRITS GO WITH YOU:
FALSE FACE REFLECTIONS ON THE GREAT RIVER

Bert Horwood

In the summer of 1991, Bert Horwood and seven companions paddled open canoes down a wild river in the northern part of the Canadian Arctic. In addition to the customary events of wilderness travel by canoe, members of the party had rich encounters with wildlife and with the land. Douglas Le Pan's poem "Canoe Trip" had been read as a kind of theme piece during the trip. In particular, for Bert, the experience of muskox, of sleeping in old tent rings and the unsporting death of a lake trout had power to stimulate him to write these reflections, intertwined with excerpts of the poem. The original version, slightly edited here, was written for his companions as a way to celebrate a transforming experience.

Imagine that you, too, have completed a moving wilderness journey and have returned safe, but changed in some inexpressible way. One of your companions has written you a letter telling you how he feels.

"What of this fabulous country
Now that we have reduced it to a few hot hours
And sun-burn on our backs?"

On the scheduled flight out, one of our party sat beside Ovide Mercredi, Grand Chief of the Council of First Nations. They chatted about our canoe trip and, on parting, Mr. Mercredi said, "May the spirits go with you." I believe this kind wish came true.

It was a canoe trip with everything. There was the frustrating and interminable delay of the bush flight to reach the river. The continual daylight, the cold howling winds, the cloud patterns all signalled the high latitude. There was the excitement of new plants and animals, the prospect of good angling, the risks of self-propelled travel in remote terrain. The land was raw, new but ancient, the home of marvelous creatures. The river was swift, changeable, never to be taken for granted. We were blanketed in a kind of vibrant silence.

Close encounters were common. Some of us got close to Muskox, usually on our own terms, but not always. One canoe got uncomfortably close to extremely dangerous water. But for late night vigilance, we were close to losing canoes when the river rose unexpectedly. Anglers came close to satisfying their itch to catch char. We paddled in the light of the arctic summer night, were wind bound, tasted raw char, felt Muskox horn. There were moments of supreme action and periods of dismal waiting. The sun was hot,

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the wind was cold. There were times for long hikes, good conversations, intervals of solitude. The portages were hard enough, but few in number. Lining was smooth, with it's own kind of urgency. Muscles grew more taut.

The pick-up was on schedule. Helpful people made reentry into human habitation pleasant. Once home, familiar objects and persons welcomed us but we saw them with the gift of new eyes.

It was the ideal canoe trip.

"But here are crooked nerves made straight,
The fracture cured no doctor could correct."

But this canoe trip did something else for me. It triggered an almost continuous period of deep reflection which is only now, days after our fellowship disbanded, ripe enough to be expressed. These are things it would have been good to have talked over with companions on the river, but the ideas weren't ready in time.

Some features of the group interested me. Leadership was never an issue, yet decisions got made in ways that had full support. It seemed to me that I was very free, and so were others, to exercise private interests, to join any combination of people for any particular event. It was all right to go off alone. At the same time there was a common will and a common pulling together to accomplish whatever labour was before us. Certainly, the relatively easy pace contributed to this satisfying state of affairs. But I believe that friendship, patience, tolerance, generosity, communication, and skill in wilderness travel on the part of all contributed greatly to generally happy decision making. Perhaps these qualities were among the spirits which Ovide Mercredi had in mind.

Of course, there were awkward moments when it was unclear what the group's wish and intent was to be. One could have wished, then, for a strong lead position to be taken. But why should any one of us have to carry that burden? Better to patiently wait it out until the common will is clear.

Another feature of group life was the tendency for us to synchronize activities spontaneously. This became more noticeable as the trip went on. For example, a single person rarely went to bed early. Usually several settled down at once, if not the whole group. No one had to be wakened. Once one person was up, the others either woke up or were already awake. When one person experienced sleeplessness, usually others did, too. Another example became obvious, late in the trip, when almost everyone hiked

off, white roll in hand, within about 5 minutes of each other. I fancy that it must be like that whenever small isolated groups live and travel together over sustained periods.

Snoring deserves special mention. It is true that we have in our number some loud and virtuoso snorers. Forte, fortissimo. But snoring was sometimes synchronized to the extent that there were occasions when no one snored and occasions when everyone snored. A double quartet.

Another point about group life I especially appreciated was the fact that each person did not have to do the same thing to the same degree. There was no cooking or dish washing roster. Yet we always ate well, off clean dishes. A spirit of generous helpfulness was present, not only in the kitchen, but in pitching tents and humping packs. Maybe that is one of the greatest spirits which Ovide Mercredi wished for us.

Group life is different, I think, without darkness and a campfire. There was more hiking than there otherwise would have been, and perhaps less conversation. All the same, we had good talks covering most of the dilemmas of humanity: welfare, the law, architecture, education, forests and the land. We enjoyed poetry, jokes and stories in camp and on the move. Even without fires, the rich contrasts of our different ideas and values was evident.

"Into this reservoir we dipped and pulled out lakes and rivers,
We strung them together and made our circuit.
Now what shall be our word as we return,
What word of this curious country?"

A meteorologist in the group interpreted the clouds for us and a geologist explained the pictures at our feet. The "word of this curious country" is the word of volcanic action, ancient tropical seas laying down sediments, new upheavals and the grinding blender of glaciers long time come and lately gone. Geological minds have built a magnificent story to account for the colours, the cliffs, the buttes and mesas, the whole landscape.

In my contrary way, I couldn't help thinking that my northern ancestors had told other stories as their "word of this curious country." It was the land of trolls and giants, titans, the gods themselves. Did we not see their profiles and images carved in the rocks and pillars, highlighted by the low set sun? Weren't their figures and faces visible in the sand stone hills, frozen into stony immobility by daylight?

I was sure that some of the high pillared cliffs were the columned porches of great halls and valhallas. Boulder fields, it seemed to me, were abandoned sand boxes of troll

children and broad stretches of rolling, greening tundra surely were titanic golf courses. Did we not slide our canoes down "the slipway where titans sent splashing the last great glaciers?" It is easy to understand how the nordic myths and stories came into being. Perhaps, these, too, were part of Mr. Mercredi's blessing.

Of course it's all nonsense. Or is it? My own experience with volcanoes and glaciers is no more real than is my experience with trolls. A good story is always to be appreciated whatever its source. So is a good wish.

"And skies that roll all day with cloud-chimeras
To baffle the eye with portents and unwritten myths,"

Our trip had events which moved my being. I was impelled to think and feel differently about the ethics of wilderness travel and of my own relationship to the land. This is somewhat personal, but since so many contributed to me in so many ways, I would like to share it. The main issue is about rights and respect. Rights and respect as they relate to the river, the land, the plants and animals who live there. (By animals, I include ourselves and the local people.)

The great sweep of natural landscape, largely unchanged by humans, made me think, in general, about the landscape at home; logged over, fished out, tunneled, groomed and paved. It made me think that I have benefitted from unearned privileges at a great price. And since I have those pleasures, how can I deny the same to others, who, having nearly exhausted the easy pickings in the south are now turning their eyes northward?

At the same time, I know that one series of mistakes does not justify another series. If novice paddlers go down rapids backwards without mishap and think it was fun, should they continue to do so ever after? Coming close to screwing up in the south, it troubles me that I and my kind are so ready to screw up this land. I fear that we will try to "put a bit to the lunging wind" and "hold wild horses by the hair."

Having had the feel of virtually virgin territory, it seems to me that the rightness of growth, development and what we call progress is highly questionable. I start to think that these things, the driving ideals of our culture, are ethically insupportable. In short, they are wrong. I have no idea what, if anything, I can do about it without hypocrisy. Maybe I should never have slept in that tent ring!

The trip also marked the end of my pleasure in sport fishing. The river offered a

number of deep holes where lake trout eked out a precarious living in the unproductive water. One such hole gave us a glory hour when everyone was catching trout. Once the needs of the kitchen were met, it was catch and release all the way. Alone, at my stand on a flat rock which sloped steeply into the depths, I struck a fine 5-pounder. The ravenous, lean, beautiful creature took only a few minutes to tire, even on light tackle. Sliding it up to my feet, I saw that it was deeply hooked in the heart region and bleeding. Returning the freed fish to the water, the blood cloud flowed and in my attempts to resuscitate, my hungry, unwilling partner in sport slipped from my hands down into the depths from which she had come. The body and being of that creature is on my conscience in a way that no other fish has ever been. I saw myself as a sport fisherman in a different light and no longer liked what I saw. I collapsed my rod and stowed my lures resolving that future angling would be strictly for food. There is no room here for pride, fun, or even shame; the only proper emotions on making a kill have to be humility and gratitude; the only proper action is the sacrament of eating.

On a more public level, there were many incidents, from casual, minor litter to collecting artefacts which gave me further cause for thought. But three events stand out as examples. In one, our party killed at least 10 arctic char and left them to rot. In another, our party needlessly broke into a locked cabin. In the third, our legacy, as Bill put it, to the great river is the establishment of an operation to make future journeys easy for people.

Well, why not? For one, it is absolutely essential for me to kill to eat; either I do it myself, or it's done for me. For another, wilderness travellers have always made careful use of other people's resources in need. For the third, someone's going to do it anyway. We have rights to do these things, haven't we?

I've thought considerably about the monofilament tangle of rights involved in these questions. I think that there is a fundamental lack of respect in my relationship to my own place and to the great river. I don't think I approached Muskox as respectfully as I should. No, nor lake trout nor yellow drabas either. I looked at ancient tent rings and Inuit huts with the eyes of curiosity rather than with wonder or understanding. Beetles were for the alcohol bottle more than for appreciation of the remarkable talents which allow them to live in this "tartan of river and rocks."

This boils down to a conviction that the spirit of respect for the land and its inhabitants did not go with us, at least not with me. And it leads to a proposal for a future trip.

Food and shelter are critical elements for survival. Shelter, as we do it, doesn't

seem to have much ethical problem. But food does have a problem for me, now. The problem is that fishing yields food in addition to the ample provisions we carry. To be blunt, I don't like to kill fish for fun, nor for unwanted food. I don't think I have the right to kill anything beyond my need to live. But I sure like killing when I'm hungry. (This is a personal conviction and not one that I urge anyone else to hold.)

How about a trip where we carry 15 Calories per Kg of person per day, as survival food? For the rest, we rely on the land to provide; roots, berries, leaves, fish, whatever is edible and in season. If game is seasonable and legal, let's hunt for our food. We would leave behind just the same as the local inhabitants do: our scat, our tracks, and if need be, our bones.

In this way, we'd truly put ourselves on the land and enter into a much more genuine, less transient relationship with it. Then endurance, strength, skill, stamina and success would have enhanced meaning and I (at least) would discover more deeply the spirit of respect that seemed weak in my tourist mind. What do you think?

These ideas may seem wierd. They come from being one quarter mystic. They also come from close encounters with Muskox and a powerful feeling of being owned by the land rather than owning it. It would be good to talk about thoughts like these, not so much to convince one another, but to understand and appreciate each other's values.

"And yet the marvels we have seen remain.
We think of the eagles, of the fawns at the river bend,
The storms, the sudden sun, the clouds sheered downwards.
O so to move! With such immaculate decision!
O proudly as waterfalls curling like cumulus!"

(All quotes from Douglas Le Pan's "Canoe Trip," all sketches from Bert's journal.)

Bert Horwood was born and raised in Canada's Ottawa Valley. There he learned to be at home in the bush and on the lakes and rivers. His biological and spiritual connection with the earth has shifted from interest to identity and kinship. He is a Professor of Outdoor and Experiential Education at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario.